

VZCZCXRO2238
RR RUEHIK
DE RUEHVI #1556/01 3440724
ZNR UUUUU ZZH
R 100724Z DEC 09
FM AMEMBASSY VIENNA
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 3827
INFO RUCNMEM/EU MEMBER STATES

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 VIENNA 001556

SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR EUR/CE

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [EUN](#) [AU](#)

SUBJECT: AUSTRIA: BURGENLANDERS REMAIN EU-SKEPTICS, DESPITE BENEFITS
OF MEMBERSHIP

VIENNA 00001556 001.2 OF 002

¶1. Summary: Burgenland, Austria's smallest and poorest province, has benefitted enormously from EU membership and the opening of the Hungarian border at the end of the Cold War. Local members of Austria's two governing parties - the Social Democrats (SPO) and conservative People's Party (OVP) - agree that border-free travel and EU assistance grants have been a boon for the economy. They also maintain that the perception of rising crime is grossly exaggerated. Nevertheless, Burgenlanders remain among the most EU-skeptical of Austrians. Though border controls between Austria and fellow EU-member Hungary were eliminated in 2007, the GOA maintains military patrols in the province. Local politicians say privately that the patrols are a purely symbolic gesture to assure older residents who fear the open border will lead to higher crime. End Summary.

On the Cutting Edge of Integration

¶2. With a population of about 280,000 (3% of the national population), Burgenland is Austria's smallest province, as well as the poorest and flattest. Though it produces the country's best wine, it lacks ski slopes or major cultural attractions. Burgenland is in many ways on the cutting edge of Austrian integration with Europe. The province lies just to the east of Vienna and shares a long border with Hungary. When the Berlin Wall came down in 1989, Burgenland became the open door linking Austria to its East Bloc neighbor. Hungarians, and later Poles, Ukrainians, and other easterners, have been a regular presence in the province for years.

EU Skepticism Despite Funding

¶3. Local political leaders agree the open border has been a boon for the economy. And so has the EU -- of the nine Austrian provinces, Burgenland is probably the one that should be the most thankful for EU membership. After Austria joined in 1995, the EU designated Burgenland as a priority area for regional development assistance. Between 2000 and 2006 the EU provided nearly 250 million euros in funding, primarily for tourism and technology projects in the province. The results have been impressive; Burgenland has narrowed the economic gap with the rest of the country.

¶4. But provincial members of the governing SPO and OVP say Burgenlanders are, if anything, more EU-skeptical than other Austrians. Christian Sagartz, an OVP provincial MP, told us a recent poll indicated that the EU is even less popular in Burgenland than in the other provinces. Gerhard Steier, the SPO Mayor of Siegendorf, a Burgenland town with a population of about 2,700, told us during a recent visit to the province that Burgenlanders have developed a kind of "bunker mentality" in response to a history of foreign invasions. From the Huns, to the Ottomans, to the Soviets, foreign armies have passed through the plains of Burgenland en route to Vienna. As a result, Steier said, people have learned to jealously protect their property. The Mayor noted that homeowners in the province tend to encircle their gardens with high walls, whereas in other Austrian provinces the gardens are open for all to

15. Many residents, particularly older ones, view the shoppers and day trippers from Hungary and other countries to the east as "invaders" in their own right. The checkpoints on the border with Hungary were shut down at the end of 2007 under the Schengen Treaty, further opening a border that had been closed for half a century before the fall of the Berlin Wall. In response to concerns that increasing cross-border traffic would mean more crime, the Austrian Government continued to deploy troops to patrol Burgenland even after the checkpoints were closed. The patrols remain popular and in September 2009 the GOA extended them for another year. But political contacts in the province seem embarrassed by the military presence, which they say is purely symbolic. Steier said the soldiers do not even have arrest authority - if they were to witness a crime, they would have to call the police. He said they are there to reassure local residents nostalgic for the "safer" days of the Cold War when the border was sealed.

16. Burgenland, like the rest of Austria, has seen an increase in certain types of crimes in recent years. But by any reasonable standard it remains a safe, even sleepy, province. Some of our contacts acknowledged that the open border has probably contributed to a modest rise in crime, particularly burglaries. But Rudolf Strommer, OVP floor leader in the provincial parliament, averred to us that the real cause is an increase in the number of asylum seekers residing in the province. Asylum cases often drag on for years, during which time applicants are not permitted to work. Some misuse this idle time by getting involved in petty crimes, he said. Strommer said about 1.6 percent of all Austrian crime is committed in Burgenland, though 6 percent of the national police force is assigned to the province. He said fears, not the facts, account for the widespread perception of rising crime. "Every time someone

VIENNA 00001556 002.2 OF 002

steals a car, everyone, including the press, blames it on the EU and the open border," he said.

17. Strommer said the public is equally misguided in its views of the economic consequences of EU membership and border-free travel. Even EU development aid, which has done wonders for Burgenland, has generated complaints. Strommer compared economic aid to a drug that requires a higher dosage to maintain the same effect -- Burgenlanders appreciate the assistance, but complain that they don't receive more. Markus Prenner, party manager of the OVP Burgenland, said even the direct beneficiaries of EU funding argue that the grants need to be raised and extended further into the future.

18. Steier also sees a sharp divergence between public perception and economic reality. His town is located near a once highly subsidized sugar factory that closed its doors in 2003. Older residents maintain that things were better back when the sugar factory provided good, reliable employment. When he explains that the factory provided 300 low-paid jobs, and that some 800 people currently work in better-paid positions in the area around the factory, they don't believe him. These same folks, he said, complain to him about the Hungarians who come to use the public swimming pools in the summer. Some have even spread a false rumor that Hungarians are offered a lower admission price. In reality, he said, many local residents have installed swimming pools in their backyards and no longer use the community facilities, and the Hungarians have helped replace the lost revenue.
"Europaforum" Seeks to Promote EU

19. Strommer and Prenner claim the OVP is the only party that campaigns in the province on a pro-EU line. The OVP leadership is close to Europaforum Burgenland, an organization dedicated to educating the public about the EU in Burgenland as well as in Hungary and Slovenia. Europaforum is funded by the EU and is officially non-partisan, but its conservative, business-oriented membership tends toward the OVP. Prenner said research conducted by the organization shows that the open border is a two-way street that has benefited Burgenland. The latest statistics indicate that Hungarians spend some 40 million euros per year in Burgenland, twice

as much as Burgenlanders spend in Hungary, he said.

¶10. Such efforts may, in the long run, turn public opinion on the EU. But our contacts said they expect things to get worse before they get better. Martin Hollweck, spokesman for the SPÖ mayor of Mattersburg (population 7,000), said the rightwing, xenophobic Freedom Party (FPÖ) has exploited anxieties over migration and crime to promote its anti-EU, anti-foreigner policies. The FPÖ drew a modest 6 percent in the last provincial elections in 2005, but Hollweck expects the party to at least double that in the 2010 elections, a prediction echoed by others.

Comment: A Reflection of the National Mood

¶11. Public opinion in Burgenland is a slightly more extreme reflection of the national mood. By any objective measure, Austria as a whole has benefited from EU membership, but the population remains fixated on the perceived negative effects. The financial crisis has recently boosted pro-EU sentiment somewhat, but that effect may wear off once the economy improves.